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ABSTRACT

This study of the classroom practice of an elementary school teacher of Aboriginal students in Western Australia demonstrates the way in which teacher intentions are hindered by the sociopolitical context of the school. The teacher had been identified by the school as a successful teacher of Indigenous students and was accepted by Aboriginal parents as such. The situation in which he worked, however, was not conducive to the establishment of effective strategies for communication or better relationships with parents and the community. Findings from observations of classroom events and interviews with the teacher, students, and other key participants indicated that the teacher was unable to translate good intentions into satisfactory outcomes for Aboriginal students because the teacher's own value system differed markedly from those of his students; the principal constructed an environment that reflected the dominant culture and did not welcome Indigenous students and parents; the teacher was also deputy principal, and was identified with the administration by the parents, resulting in parent alienation; the school did not have the infrastructure to support teachers' efforts to provide appropriate schooling for Indigenous students; and conflict among students that arose from outside factors inhibited the teacher's efforts to provide quality schooling for the Aboriginal students. For better education of Indigenous students, change must start at the top; teachers and parents need to cooperate to satisfy student needs, not bureaucratic or parent wishes; and parents must be welcomed as collaborators. (TD)

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Barriers to effective teaching of Indigenous students. ®

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Barriers to effective teaching of Indigenous students.

Abstract

A study of the classroom practice of a teacher of Aboriginal students in a metropolitan primary school in Western Australia demonstrated the way in which teacher intentions are hindered by the sociopolitical context of the school. Observation of classroom events and interviews with the teacher, students and other key participants were recorded. The data were transferred to Nudist software as a foundation for analysis.

The teacher had been identified by the school as a successful teacher of Indigenous students and was accepted by Aboriginal parents as such. The situation in which he worked, however, was not conducive to the establishment of effective strategies for communication or better relationships with parents and the community.

Findings indicated that the teacher was unable to translate good intentions into satisfactory outcomes for Aboriginal students because of the influence of four main factors:

(1) Background factors influenced student behaviour and attitudes at school;

(2) The teacher's own value system, which differed markedly from those of the students in the class.

(3) Power relations within the school which prevented the implementation of effective strategies for the education of Aboriginal students;

(4) Inadequate communication between the home and the school which exacerbated problems rather than resolved them

It is concluded that an individual teacher, working in isolation from a cohesive school approach, is unable to resolve key issues which contribute to the better education of Aboriginal students. It is suggested in the paper that success was contingent upon a more cohesive and collaborative effort by the school to develop policy and practice. This includes the involvement of Indigenous parents and community members in the planning of policy and school procedures, as well as establishing more effective communication with the parents of the children.

Barriers to effective teaching of Indigenous students.

Gary Partington, Kaye Richer, John Godfrey, Mort Harslett, Bernard Harrison

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Introduction

The majority of Indigenous students in Australia fail to complete high school and as a consequence their career options are markedly circumscribed. For example, in Western Australia, each year less than 20% of Indigenous students complete high school, compared with over 60% of non-Indigenous students. This suggests that the kind of schooling being delivered to them is inadequate. For the majority of Indigenous students, changes are required if they are to complete high school and succeed.

The changes needed are complex and extensive and go to the very roots of education and particularly its underlying principles and philosophy. Morgan and Slade argue that "the educational outcomes of Aboriginal students are largely a consequence of a broader process of cultural domination and exclusion". They consider that a solution to this state of affairs lies in "developing a truly multicultural

context that provides for the mutual inclusion of all participating cultures" (p.12).

Folds considered that the schools contributed much to the destruction of the culture of the communities in which they were situated. This destruction was accompanied by resistance to the efforts of the teachers, and this resulted in failure to learn new skills which would have enabled community members to overcome their dependent status. Such a process is evident across Australia in the high dropout rates of students from school. As the agents of the dominant culture in educating students, teachers have responsibility for engineering change to the benefit of the Indigenous students they teach.

When Fanshawe described the ideal teacher of Indigenous students as one who will, in part,

> *be warm, encouraging, demanding, stimulating, responsible and systematic; that he will have a positive attitude to his Aboriginal students, valuing them as people, respecting their culture, being free from racial prejudice, and having confidence in their ability to achieve the demanding but realistic goals set for them; that he will be knowledgeable not only about the subject he teaches, but also about Aboriginals, Aboriginal adolescents and Aboriginal culture,*

he could not have envisaged that nearly a quarter of a century later, the outcomes of Indigenous education would continue to suggest that few teachers meet these criteria - or equivalent ones - in a way that results in effective educational outcomes. Whether his criteria are valid indicators of the effectiveness of teachers is uncertain because they have never been tested. In subsequent years many authors have identified characteristics of effective teachers of Indigenous students , yet

As part of a larger study , the authors studied the processes that occurred as teachers taught Aboriginal students. In the present study the classroom practice of a teacher in a metropolitan primary school in Western Australia was investigated over a period of three terms in order to determine what factors contributed to the effectiveness of teachers of Indigenous students.

The School, the Teacher and the Context

The teacher, who will be named Stephen Blair for this study, had applied for over 200 schools when the contract for his previous position ended. He added a note to his application stating that, due to his extensive experience in teaching Aboriginal students, and the fact that the last school to which he had been appointed had closed, he would like to be place in an urban school with a large Aboriginal enrolment. The Education Department complied with his request, appointing him to Naples Primary School. This school had 35% Indigenous students enrolled at the beginning of the year, a proportion which rose to 40% on occasions. The school reflected the low socio-economic status of the neighbourhood, experiencing a high turnover of students and relatively few resources beyond those provided by the Education Department.

The class was composed of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. There were 26 students on the class list at the beginning of the year, including nine Aboriginal students who were mostly from the local Nyoongar community. Sixteen students, including seven Aboriginal students, were female. There were only two Aboriginal boys, although one other boy had an Aboriginal father but did not acknowledge his Aboriginality. Nor did the other students in class, so he was not considered to be Aboriginal for this study. The students ranged in age from 11 to 13.

The school was bordered on one side by a busy arterial road. The houses surrounding the school were mainly older rental homes built by the State's housing commission (Homeswest). These appeared run down with poorly maintained yards. Some of the Homeswest houses abutting the school ground to the west had been demolished and replaced with medium density town houses.

Mr Blair was regarded by the principal as a superior teacher, particularly of Aboriginal students. When we discussed the possibility of conducting research into the classroom practice of teachers in the school, she immediately nominated him. Subsequent early interviews with Aboriginal parents confirmed this perception of Mr Blair as a good teacher of their children. He was the male deputy principal, which

meant that he was engaged in administrative duties 50% of the time. He shared the class with the female deputy principal. He took mathematics, social studies and art with the students. Three other teachers were involved in teaching the students: a physical education teacher, a music teacher and a language teacher (the school had been allocated a Japanese language teacher, and all students studied this language).

Mr Blair was well regarded by most students, particularly the Aboriginal students, as was indicated below:

> *I: What sort of students do teachers like most?*
>
> *Students who dress and act intelligent. That's what teachers like most and if they're not like that they don't recognise them as much as the other students.*
>
> *Miss Johnson gives jobs to them all the time. Mr Blair puts us in the picture. He is good with all students who don't get enough attention like Noelene and Kelland. He picks up bad things the student councillors do, not like Miss Staples or Miss Quill. As soon as we do something wrong they jump on us.*

Other Aboriginal students confirmed this view of Mr Blair, reporting his willingness to help them when they needed assistance. His humour also was the subject of favourable reports by these students. These two characteristics - helping and humour have been cited as important characteristics of effective teachers in relation to Indigenous students.

Despite the generally favourable perceptions of Mr Blair, student opinions varied according to their recent interactions with him. Dianne, for example, was very critical of him shortly after a major incident involving a fight with another girl and for which she received disciplinary action from the teacher. Dianne was asked what Mr Blair would do if a student was naughty. She replied, "Probably give you checks and sometimes he sends us straight to the office or shout at us all the time." She also reported that the kind of student Mr Blair liked was one who "sits quiet and don't touch anything while he's talking and don't get distracted by anything else, and don't laugh in class much." Given the dynamic nature of the classroom activities observed, and the drive by the teacher to obtain a happy class, such observations appear to be biased by the recency of Dianne's altercation. Certainly, observations indicated that these behaviours were demanded infrequently by the teacher.

However, other students also were not so convinced that he was the best teacher. The student councillors (all of whom were non-Aboriginal) who had been disparaged by Jenny, noted Mr Blair's sternness at times, and reported his tendency to explain matters to the whole class when some of the students already knew what he was talking about. When asked what he would do if students had finished all their work, one responded, "You just have to go on to the next page of maths and that's supposed to be for the next day." Other students agreed with this assessment, which was consistent with Mr Blair's self-evaluation. He was keen for students to be successful and for this reason time on task was an important characteristic of his instruction.

The mixed views of students regarding Mr Blair suggest that he was not universally liked. However, these judgments changed with the events that took place in the classroom. On one occasion - following a lesson in which they became immersed - the student councillors reported their enjoyment at working with Mr Blair. It is likely that relations with the teacher were fluid rather than stable.

Mr Blair utilised strategies which were intended to develop rapport with Indigenous students. He started the year off with photo albums of his previous schools and experiences in the room. Students spent their free time looking at these, and occasionally he would explain photos they were interested in. He also talked about his current experiences with students following weekends and holidays, and discussed student experiences in the same way. In these ways he developed rapport with the students and they came to know him as a person, an attribute of teaching important to Indigenous students .

He also endeavoured to find out about the students' backgrounds, but admitted that this was sometimes

difficult because of the circumstances of his teaching. Having the students for only part of the day limited the opportunities for extended interaction in non work times, such as at the start and end of the day, when other teachers taught them. As a result, although he got to know many of the students in class, there wasn't time to become well acquainted with the backgrounds and interests of all of them. He remarked on several occasions about his lack of knowledge of some students. Mr Blair commenced the day's instruction with the class on only one day each week, and was not involved in teaching them at the close of the day on any day of the week. Usually, he took them between morning recess and afternoon recess. This further limited his ability to get to know the students through interaction with their parents.

Working with Students

In Mr Blair's class, students had considerable latitude to direct their lives. He rarely intervened in their movement around the room, seating patterns, interaction with other students and ways of working. There were rules for classroom operation but these focused principally on respecting the rights of others. Students who wished to leave the room requested permission in lessons in which deskwork was being undertaken but in lessons such as art, students were able to exercise their own judgment in leaving to get materials. In part, the development of independence was a consequence of the pressures on Mr Blair as a deputy principal, for he was often out of the room on administrative duties. He outlined his approach to the need to develop independence:

> *Trust. You try and build an atmosphere of trust, you try to use ... For example, you get called out of the room or you're late so you don't get into the room. That's a difficult one. But when you're called out one of the strategies I've used is to simply say to one of the kids - or say to the lot - I expect you to do this and do that. You need to become independent because you're going to have to be. I will usually say to one of the kids, right, can you be in charge. Can you let me know what's going on.* (Mr Blair, July 19)

From the perspective of instruction of Indigenous students, such an emphasis on independence would have been a successful strategy . Despite this, the demands on Mr Blair's time and the frequent interruptions to his teaching, along with the fragmented nature of his relationship with the class as a whole, reduced the possibilities for him to establish the kind of close relationship which is essential for effective instruction of Aboriginal students .

Talk among students was encouraged except when it interfered with a focus on work. Art lessons were marked by a very social atmosphere as students discussed their work and shared stories. In mathematics, talk had to be more directed towards the work in hand but even so, students were encouraged to discuss the work. Working with other students was encouraged. For mathematics, although students were on individual contracts they were able to work together to solve problems. The teacher circulated the room assisting students.

> *When helping the students, Mr Blair either leaned over the student or knelt down alongside. He talks through the problem with the student and demonstrates the problem. Then he gets the student to do a problem. He gives advice. "Use this as rough paper"*
>
> *He calls to Matthew, "Matthew, are you still trying to work out the railway carriage* [a reference to a problem students had to complete]*?" Matthew indicates he is. "Do you want a hint?" Matthew decides he does. The teacher gets Matthew's sheet and studies the solution to determine an appropriate hint and gives it.* (Observation, 15 May 1998).

Lessons were marked by diversity and an effort to relate content to material that was appealing to students. Most of the mathematics lessons were integrated with the art lessons and involved creativity and design.

Despite his efforts, Mr Blair was concerned that the students weren't learning enough. Part of the problem stemmed from student unwillingness to report that they didn't understand work. Mr Blair stated,

> *It seems to me that perhaps in the past they've been led to believe that making a mistake is a*

> *bad thing and shouldn't happen. And that might have come from two things. It might have come from teachers saying, "No, you're wrong", instead of, "Good try". Or it may have come from sanctions from the group.*

As a consequence, he had to use alternative strategies to ensure students comprehended the work:

> *I don't sit down. I remember other schools I've been at where you set a task, if there's a problem kids put their hand up, they come down here or I'll come up and see you. O.K., if there's two or three you stop the class, explain the problem. But here you just walk around the whole time. Are you O.K.? How's it going? Constant monitoring. I don't sit. I don't sit there* [at the desk]. *It doesn't happen.*

As a consequence, the small group of students who had few difficulties with the work - including the student counsellors - were subjected to the frequent pauses during which Mr Blair explained material to the whole class and to which they objected. His efforts to develop individual programs and group approaches to learning reflected the concern to avoid such disruption.

Classroom Management

Classroom discipline was handled discreetly and the teacher's relations with students were not coloured by a history of misbehaviour. Students with records of misbehaviour were given responsibilities within the class just as other students were. When a misdemeanour did occur it was quickly put behind the teacher and students and relations returned to normal:

> *A child at the back of the room cries out. Kelland, David and Jeremy have been having a tussle behind the cupboard where they can't be readily seen. They are told to "Come here. Go and rub out the names on the list and write your names." This is the student management list typical of primary classes. They write their names up and add a cross* [Four crosses means a note home] *After, Kelland goes to Mr Blair, who asks, "Have you got something to go on with?" Once again, his voice is quiet. He calls David and Jeremy over. Quietly gives directions to get on with some work. The students have done the mental, and there is always their contracts to go on with, so in Mr Blair's eyes they shouldn't be idle.*

In resolving altercations with students, Mr Blair endeavoured to give all parties a voice, listening to both sides of issues before making judgments, then seeking to resolve them to the mutual satisfaction of all parties. For instance:

> *Stephen on yard duty, and a mother (from the ASSPA committee meeting the other day) complained to him that her son was being teased by two girls. Stephen agreed to do something about it. He got the boy ("Let's first of all get the story from the horse's mouth"). The boy identified the girls. Said they were saying he loved Karena and Alisse. Stephen called these girls up. Karena said she knew nothing about it but Alisse obviously did - but she said the boy was saying the same thing about them. Stephen handled it low key - told them quietly that the student didn't like it and they should stop. Later, he caught up with the boy and told him the same.*

Mr Blair's approach was pleasant and firm. He didn't threaten or force the children, instead presenting advice. This approach was observed many times during visits to the school. However, these practices did not emerge simply because the teacher favoured them. There was evidence of considerable social control by Mr Blair. He constantly monitored events in the class as he marked work:

> *Stephen marks work as he goes around. He keeps an eye on other students. He ticks work. Says "good" or "no worries". Robert is not on task. Stephen sees this.*
>
> *Stephen: Robert, do you need to ask me something? "No," says Robert. A means of control.*

When talk became too noisy, he intervened:

> *Stephen: "Oh, Hang on a minute! Excuse me! Shhh! Look, if you are desperately stuck, you can discuss it with someone next to you but I don't want you discussing the Eagles crushing defeat of the Bulldogs, please." The class quietens down.*

Mr Blair's use of humour, both through anecdotes and plays on words appealed to the students, who commented on this aspect of his teaching in interviews with them. Students reported his approach as "joking" or "He jokes with us". It extended beyond that, however, to using colloquial language in class in a way that reflected his understanding of what appeals to students of this age. In a mathematics lesson, for example, Mr Blair introduced a game which demonstrated the influence of environmental factors on a population of kangaroos. These factors included resources, hunting and disease. All students were given a factor to represent. Those who took the roles of disease and hunters were told this in secret. He said, "I'll go along the line and whisper 'hunter' or 'gutsache'".

Different Backgrounds

Student background was an inhibiting factor in the achievement of success among students. Lack of money was a problem for many families and this was reflected in student dress and the provision of basic necessities. Students often came to school without lunches and without having had breakfast. Mr Blair was aware of the poverty in the community, which was widespread:

> *If you don't have those basic prerequisites for learning in place nothing will happen. If you don't have food in your stomach, warm clothes, and a sound and stable home environment and a sense of belonging, a sense of identity in terms of who you are and where you're from and possibly where you're going, if you don't have all those then when you come in here your mind is going to be taken up with solving those other essential ... it's going to be solved with trying to get those other essential needs. Where's my next dinner coming from, where are my warm clothes coming from, how can I get warm, where is mum and dad going to be tonight, or who is mum or dad going to be with tonight. Is there going to be fighting in the home, is there going to be grog in the home, is there going to be drugs at the home? Am I going to have a night where I can lie down in the bed and go to sleep?* (Mr Blair July 1998)

The school had strategies to cope with such difficulties. A clothing bank was operated by the school administration and, in previous years students had access to ASSPA funds for the provision of lunches if they had no food. Family support, however, was seen by Mr Blair as crucial to solving such problems for the students. Aboriginal students were more likely to have this support through the extended family but non-Aboriginal students were often in a more isolated situation.

During the course of my interviews with Mr Blair, he informed me of his stable upbringing and the significant influences in his life. He was concerned that many of the students in his class - both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal - had very unsettled lives and that this would affect their chances of success. He said, "I think there is a role for the teacher to try and instil into the kids a sense of right and wrong. A sense of values, self-respect, respect for others, all those sorts of things."

Mr Blair was reflective in his approach to teaching the students. The issues considered above strongly influenced his teaching, both directly and indirectly. One consequence was his tendency to lecture to the students (and some students claimed they did not listen to him on these occasions. Once when one of the researchers was present, he gave a small lecture in which he stated,

> *"I leave here at 4.30 and I can walk away from it. You can't walk away because what happens here affects the rest of your lives. This is where you learn responsibility. You're 12 years of age. You don't come giggling, throwing stuff and expect to learn anything useful. No one can make you work. No one can come to me and say 'work, work, work' because at the end of the day I have to decide that I will work. The only one to be affected is you. I've got a career and I get paid for it. Your future depends on what you do now and it begins now. At the end of the day, if you don't practice at working, you wont be able to do it. You*

> *won't have the skills. You'll have the brain, but without the work it will be like a weak leg or a weak arm. Without practice, it will be weak. You've got to practise.*

In his efforts, however, he unwittingly denigrated the students' backgrounds, and this caused offence. The implied rejection of their community was reported to me by two students and may have been noticed by more.

School Community Relations

It was unfortunate for Mr Blair that he had two students in his class who had been engaged in a conflict going back several years, to a time when they both attended a rural school. Staff in the school were well aware of the problem which was linked with family conflict as well. Mr Blair explained the background to the problem:

> *About four years ago Geraldine and Dianne both started attending school together in Longley. And virtually from day one they fought with each other. There's no apparent reason for it. I said to Dianne's mum, why. She said, "Look I don't know they've just fought each other". And she said they lived close to each other in town in Longley and they fought and argued on the way to school. She said at school the deputy or whatever would ring her because she had a job, but Geraldine's grandmother or guardian didn't have a job so couldn't be contacted. So she was always being dragged up there and Dianne's mum said she went down to see this lady and said "You've got to sort something out". But nothing has happened. So in those years it has just gone on. It's been an ongoing argument and my prediction is that they'll argue till the day they die.*

The conflict between these two girls (one of whom, Dianne, Mr Blair described as "bright as a button") continued for two terms until one of them was moved by her mother to another school in order to terminate the conflict. Even so, it led to strained relations in class and tested Mr Blair's ability to maintain a harmonious classroom. In addition, it revealed the school's inability to cope with community relations in a harmonious way.

There were two major difficulties in the way of establishing effective relations with the Indigenous community of the school. In the first place, the two Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers in the primary school were not members of the local Nyoongar community. Both were from other states and obtained less respect from the parents of students at school. As one teacher put it, "They don't have strong bonds or anything with the people, they're not related. They're nice people and they work well with the kids but they don't have any more of a bond than I do". These AIEWs didn't interact with the students in the same way as locally appointed AIEWs would. Rather, they regarded the students as deprived and applied negative stereotypes to them . Consequently, there was no effective conduit between the school and the home.

Added to this, the school principal did not believe the Indigenous community deserved special attention. She informed us that the Aboriginal children were no different from other children in the school and had no need for special treatment with regard to their backgrounds. Her views demonstrated that she was unaware of considerable recent research which clearly shows a strong cultural continuity among urban Indigenous people . Through their portrayal of the day to day lives of their people, Indigenous writers such as Archie Weller confirm the validity of cultural continuity. Failure to acknowledge this constituted a gross failing of the school administration.

One teacher said that the principal "really dressed me down" on the issue of shame, which is a common Aboriginal response to embarrassing or confusing situations:

> *She shouted at me, well, not shouted at but really dressed me down, "Kids here do not have shame, we don't believe in shame in this school, we don't do it, the AEW's* [sic] *don't do it, I don't do it and the teachers don't do it. It's simple and the kids here do not speak any other language. Nyoongar was gone a long time ago. We don't believe in that and we don't believe in any other language, they just need to read and write, that's the bottom line." Yes,*

that's where she's coming from. (Rose Leonard)

Mr Blair was in a difficult situation in relation to the principal. He informed us at the end of the year, after the completion of data gathering, that he was subject to constant frustration at being unable to put into effect the kinds of strategies which he knew would work in improving relations between the home and the school. The principal would not allow him to visit Aboriginal families in their homes; for some time, even the Aboriginal and Islander Education Workers were not allowed to conduct such visits. Parents received an unwelcoming reception when they visited the school and the principal's direct and intimidating approach to students caused anger among parents.

On several occasions Mr Blair was confronted by parents who were angered by the actions of the school generally, and more specifically by the principal. On one occasion when the principal had called a student a liar, the student's father confronted Mr Blair:

> *Later, after lunch, the dad arrived and threw the door of the deputies' office open and said, "I'm looking for Blair". I said, "I don't know any Blair, but I'm Stephen Blair" "Yes, Blair" he said. He accused me of calling his daughter a liar. He said, "I'll get you for this". I said I didn't know about that, and explained what had taken place. Elena had called Dianne a liar, which she was. Mr Francis said that there can't be a meeting because it would just cause more trouble. I tried to shake hands. Mr Francis refused and I said, "Look, are you really interested in settling this or are you just going to complain?" He replied that he was taking his kids out of school and that all the problems stem from the AEWs* [sic]. *It was their fault, and they were "f'ing useless". I defended them.*
>
> *I felt like saying to him, "Listen, you come up here, throw the door open, physically intimidate me, then expect me to solve your kid's problems". He took the kids out of school. As he was walking away I said to him, "Think about this. Do you want to talk about this. You know what is best. You need to come and talk about this. I put my hand out. He shook it and said, "Catch me on a good day".*
>
> *He has threatened teachers with a baseball bat. He is a violent man when he wants to be. I felt it was going to be on and I backed down. I always feel I have to back down. You've got everything to lose.*

Such confrontations were avoidable but the position of Mr Blair as male deputy principal put him in a position in which he was forced to resolve difficult issues. The parents who experienced the intransigence of the school principal also blamed Mr Blair for the situation, despite his positive attitudes.

> *Sally: They* [the AIEWs] *don't know how to communicate with our kids.*
>
> *Kaye: Do you think that its because they're not Nyoongar or?*
>
> *Sally: Yes. Any chance of sending them back?*
>
> *Kaye: You never know.*
>
> *Sally: I'd be glad to send my kids back there* [if they go] *but as long as those AEW's and Elena Waters is there I'll never send them back. Really, they didn't want to leave.*
>
> *Kaye: What about the other teachers?*
>
> *Sally: We haven't got any problems with them, its just the AEW's and Elena Waters.*
>
> *Kaye: What about Stephen?*
>
> *Sally: Put him and Elena on a line, they get on fine. He's an idiot . . . . . .*

Not all parents saw Mr Blair in this light, as has been indicated. The point we are making in this paper, however, is that all Indigenous students have a right to success in their schooling, and teachers must be able to work in an environment that is accepting of all students. Despite his best intentions, Mr Blair was implicated as an agent of the dominant culture and as such was perceived to be failing the interests of some students. In effect, he was caught between the conflicting demands of the school and the community. If he met the demands of the school, he would be unable to meet the expectations of the parents and the students; to meet the demands of the parents and students, he would fail the school. In juggling both sets of demands, he was unable to fulfil both adequately. As Rose Leonard stated,

> *There's different expectations from the parents of those two cultures [Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal], very much so, and the school would like to observe the Aboriginal culture and to politically accept that its there and to continue it and all that, that's the idea and that's what we've been told to do but in practical terms its all non Aboriginal approach. All the teaching staff are non Aboriginal, the AEW's are disempowered, the contribution from the Aboriginal parents is negligible or nothing, do you know what I mean? (Rose Leonard)*

It is a sad indictment of the education system that a school is unable to adapt effectively to the special needs of over a third of its pupils. Despite being professionals who have received a thorough education and many of whom have extensive experience in teaching Aboriginal students, the classroom teachers appeared to be powerless to circumvent the principal's views of what constituted an appropriate education in her school. By the end of the year, Mr Blair's own resistance to the principal's demands led to his being marginalised in the administration of the school while more compliant teachers were rewarded with greater participation in decision making.

Conclusion

It would be simplistic to argue that a teacher must be successful with all students in his or her class. Such a situation is unlikely to occur because of the many factors involved in success. There is a measure of responsibility on parents, community and students themselves to contribute to this success. Mr Blair wanted students to succeed. Although he was not universally liked by students, he was respected by most of them as fair. There were no complaints of unfairness or injustice. The important feature of his teaching was a willingness to talk to the students about their backgrounds and an expectation that they would work hard. He was demanding and knew that success in school was the key to a better future.

Mr Blair was well aware of the strategies which could make a difference. He sought to get to know parents informally and be able to discuss their children with them. He worked with the ASSPA committee to integrate Aboriginal perspectives in the curriculum, but the absence of a significant number of Indigenous participants inhibited the effectiveness of this group.

There is no simple one to one relationship between the teacher and the students in the class. It is inevitable that teachers will get on better with some students than others. It is imperative, however, that teachers are aware of the reasons for this pattern of liking. There are subtle influences at work that make it difficult for teachers to be aware of their effect on different students. While it is comforting to assume that your "normal" way of interacting is acceptable to all, teachers need to learn more appropriate ways of relating to Indigenous students so that inclusion can occur. While Stephen Blair attempted to do this, he was hampered by a dominant bureaucracy that worked against him.

The principal did not feature often in this research but it was clear that she had an important role in the construction of a social environment which reflected the dominant culture and in which Indigenous students and parents were clearly not welcome. Heslop , in a study of power sharing in a remote Aboriginal community, concluded that "non-Indigenous individuals must step away from their traditional positions of power in the school and take the view that the school can benefit from having Indigenous people participate in decision making." The principal's failure to do this to any extent at all resulted in alienation of parents. This created tense confrontations which Stephen Blair had to resolve. In the eyes of the parents he became aligned with the school administration and he acquired a negative reputation as a result.

Naples Primary School did not have the infrastructure to support teachers such as Stephen Blair in his efforts to provide appropriate schooling for Indigenous students. A deliberate effort to inhibit communication with the homes of the students, the existence of power relations within the school that promoted a dominant ethos worked against the efforts of teachers who knew that different approaches were needed. The eruption of conflict among students - a consequence of factors from outside the school - further inhibited the efforts of Stephen Blair to provide quality schooling for the Indigenous students. Finally, Mr Blair's values, grounded strongly in a belief in hard work and success - were unpalatable to the students. This does not mean that such values are not desirable: all too often, Indigenous students come to believe that participation and enjoyment are adequate outcomes of schooling. The values, however, needed to be conveyed to the students in more digestible ways if they were to be seen as more than haranguing sessions.

The context within which he was functioning hindered the attainment of outcomes for which Mr Blair strove. Individual teachers are unable to provide the kind of education needed for success unless there is a concerted effort by the school and the community. It is clear that if better education for Indigenous students is to emerge, change needs to start at the top, where the social and political context can be constructed in a way that is sympathetic to the needs of teachers and community members who put the change into effect. A successful approach requires cohesion among teachers and parents in their efforts: the focus of efforts must be the education of the students rather than the demands of the bureaucracy or individual parental wishes. Parents must be welcomed by the school as collaborators in a process which entails mutual communication and understanding.

References